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Declare an Amnesty for Moscow's Spies

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How many Soviet spies are there in the U.S.? U.S. officials know that many of the some 3,000 Soviet and Soviet-bloc diplomatic and trade personnel in the U.S. are professional espionage agents, but the Walker spy-ring case has focused new attention on those U.S. citizens who have been recruited to pass secrets to the Soviets. No one has much of an idea how many such free-lance spies there are. The West Germans have recently found that they have far too many spies of whatever stripe in sensitive positions. The best short-term way to reduce the number of free-lance spies would be to offer amnesty from prosecution to all those who come forward and confess, implicating their Soviet contacts and any fellow spies in the process.

It is reasonable to assume that there are from several hundred to several thousand Soviet espionage agents and "assets" operating in the U.S. today. This does not include Soviet intelligence personnel operating under diplomatic cover as embassy and consular staff or United Nations officials; the group of agents I am discussing is U.S. citizens or residents who are working for the Soviets for financial rewards or the relatively smaller number recruited through blackmail, coercion or ideological sympathy.

The Walker case has prompted a belated response to the ease with which critical secrets are sold. The discovery of massive leaks of defense secrets has resulted in the Defense Department reducing by 10% the number of personnel holding security clearances, Congress passing new legislation expanding the use of polygraph examinations of federal employees, and provision for the death penalty for spying by members of the armed forces.

While a good beginning, these steps are not likely to be enough to uncover or neutralize those now selling U.S. secrets. While the Soviets and others can rely on their brutal internal security apparatus, the U.S. must rely on its greatest strengths: creativity and innovation. They have served the U.S. well in the areas of technology, the arts and business, and now should be applied to counterintelligence. The U.S. needs an amnesty program for American spies.

Consider the mental state of an American who somehow has become entangled with the Soviets. Although the selling of secrets has probably been surprisingly easy, there is that ever-present fear of being caught. The already apprehensive spy now reads about the Walker case, the new peacetime death penalty, the increased use of polygraphs, and all the clamor about increasing the spy-catching resources of the FBI. This may not mean much to a professional Soviet spy, but it has very likely engendered some fear, remorse and paranoia among those "spying for dollars."

It seems reasonable to assume that among them there are a number who would like to get out of the spy business, but who are either psychologically unable to break with their handlers or afraid of Soviet threats to reveal them to the FBI should they refuse to cooperate further. These reluctant Soviet assets should be actively encouraged to make that break.

A public campaign by the FBI highlighting the amnesty program would offer both the carrot and the stick. The carrot would be a limited period of amnesty (i.e., immunity from prosecution) for those who voluntarily admit their activities and the stick would be the increased risk of being detected and arrested through the new active internal security measures. The FBI message would be something like this: "We know there are many Americans now working for foreign powers. While we may not know all of those doing so, we have identified a good many who are now under surveillance. We have initiated several new programs to bring to justice those individuals involved in espionage. But before we commence we suggest anyone illegally acting on behalf of a foreign power voluntarily come forward. For the next 90 days anyone who freely admits his involvement in espionage activities, makes a complete confession and cooperates fully with the government will be granted amnesty for his prior activities and his name will not be made public."

The benefits of a successful amnesty could be enormous. One cooperative spy often leads to others and almost always results in the identification of the Soviet recruiter and/or handler. If only 10% of those involved in espionage came forward, that percentage could easily double or triple from the leads or direct information produced by the confessions. The amnesty program would also have a devastating effect upon spy rings like the Walkers (in which several members did make weak attempts to quit) since it would strongly motivate each member to get to the FBI before one of the others does so. The program would also have a great impact on their Soviet contacts. They would suddenly have to worry about the reliability of all their agents. Encouraging uncertainty and paranoia within the KGB could be a substantial benefit in itself—even if not a single spy came forward.

The program should also invite professional Soviet-bloc spies to participate. The West Germans might well have profited from having had an amnesty program.

Apart from the necessary increase in the FBI's workload, the most important negative feature of an amnesty program would be that a potentially large number of traitors would get off scot-free. Some will have passed very important defense or industrial secrets to the Soviets. It will be hard to accept that they will pay no price for their crimes, but the fact that they will no longer be doing harm to the nation will make it worthwhile.

However, there has been little public outcry over the fact that many nations, including the U.S., routinely trade captured Soviet spies for others held by the Soviets. The public recognizes that the gains outweigh the losses—just as they would in an amnesty program.

U.S. officials must realize they are not now likely to detect many of these spies. Many—perhaps most—will never be caught and the damage done may never be known until the day when the West suffers for it.

To be effective an amnesty cannot be offered more than once in a life span. (No one should be encouraged to spy and expect immunity if he or she can avoid detection until the next amnesty.) But no matter how successful, it would only provide an improved foundation from which to build upon. Other measures are desperately needed. The most notable are the restoration of a domestic security data base that would ensure the integrity of each security clearance, a large increase in the counterintelligence resources of the FBI and CIA, and restoration of a death penalty for peacetime civilian spies.

But such preventive measures will take years to be fully effective. The U.S. needs to act now to stop the bleeding. Let's not wait until another spy's estranged wife stalls for 10 years before turning him in (the John Walker Jr. case) or until others blunder their way to discovery (as Christopher Boyce and Andrew Dalton Lee of "Falcon and Snowman" fame did). Protecting the U.S. and its secrets is very serious business; counterintelligence should not depend on dumb luck. It is time to go on the offensive against our enemies within.

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